ISRABEL

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Israbel ran through the streets of Paris. The cobbles were slick with filth and wet, the city was made of thick grey rain. Israbel was 16 – probably, who could be quite sure? Her mother was long dead, her father always unknown. Somewhere behind her waited a man with his belt drawn off, like a sword to smite her with. Israbel ran.

The narrow streets were mostly empty now, for night was coming. A fellow with a torch went by to light the lamps along the front of some tavern. Wet cats, thin as strings, shot across the alleys, or slunk over the roofs above.

When Israbel turned a corner into the Place du Coeur, she did not know where she was, but in the deepening dusk one further cat came slinking out to cross her path. This cat was not like the others. It was very big, the size, she was afterwards to believe, of a horse. Though the light was gone, some peculiar sheen on the darkness showed her the faint dapplings along its back, its neck, which was longer than that of any ordinary feline, and the narrow ruff about its head. Its eyes were luminous, and grey as the death of the light. It stopped.

She too, the running girl, had halted.

She thought, confusedly, *It's escaped from the great circus up at Montmartre.*

Israbel had heard of a circus, that it had many curiosities, including both people and beasts of weird appearance and characteristics.

She was not afraid of the cat. That is, not more afraid of it than of the darkness, the sadist she had escaped, the world, everything. And so, she did not, now, run away, only stood watching it, as it stood also watching her.

A hundred years later when Israbel, still 16, rich, lovely, and, in her own way, dangerous, came occasionally to explain about the great cat, she would always add, 'Its pelt was so soft and warm, so smooth and plush, like the double velvets of Venice. Like my hair, you say? Well, perhaps very like that. But truly, its pelt was much better than my hair.'

'She is the woman I intend to be my wife.'

Plinta stared, a moment. He thought, *Your wife?* And then, *She looks like an insect. Oh, a beautiful insect – some sort of exquisite beetle, with gilded black wings.*

'Really?' he said.

'You don't approve.'

Plinta shivered – but unseen: inside his mind.

‘Does it matter to you that I approve?’

‘Well, no.’

By then, the woman – the *creature* – was approaching them, slipping between the candlelit marbles of the salon.

Dumiere held out his hands. She paused, smiling, and took neither.

‘Good evening, my love,’ said Dumiere. ‘May I present my friend, Monsieur Plinta, the painter.’

She looked at Plinta.

Her eyes were like a flash of blackness seen through blue smoke.

Yes, she was beautiful. A perfect, sculpted face, large dark eyes – blue? – black? – whose lids were just barely touched with kohl, a long aquiline nose (perhaps she was a Jewess?), a wonderful mouth, not large – yet full, and capable of lengthening its shape – blushed either with rouge or uncommon good health.

She was not young. That is, she was about 25 or so, Plinta thought. Not that, physically, she seemed much older than 16. Yet her eyes knew things. Perhaps her clear and unlined eyes were even older – thirty, forty –*fifty*?

Plinta, the artist, now realised why he had thought of her pictorially and specifically as a beetle. Her black dress wrapped her closely, thrusting up a velvet glimpse of breasts, holding her corseted waist like two tight ebony hands ringed

with gold. Her hair, too, which she wore partly loose, was quilled and rayed with gold – wings.

He thought, distinctly, *She is a vampire*.

'Madame,' he said, and bowed.

'Oh, but, Monsieur,' she said, 'I'm not married.'

'Not yet,' agreed Dumière. Now he reached out and took hold of her, like the tight hands of her dress on her waist.

'Come on, let's dance.'

As he led her away, she glanced back once, and directly into Plinta's eyes.

What was her name? Had Dumière not told him?

The next evening, as Plinta, who had just left his bed, lay on the sofa reading the morning's journals and drinking bitter coffee, his shambling servant Colas showed Israbel into the studio.

Plinta did not get up. Then he thought he had better, to be rude was too obvious. So he rose. But, when he did that, she laughed at him.

She said, 'I saw last night, Monsieur Plinta, you'd penetrated my disguise.'

Today she wore very dark blue-green, with a lemon plume in her hat. She was still like a beautiful beetle. Or maybe a lizard –

‘Disguise? I didn’t know you’d worn fancy-dress, madame.’

‘Oh yes, of course. Always. But you saw right through to me, didn’t you? As if I were – naked.’

Plinta felt at once an unmistakable and vivid surge of lust. Positioned high in his own brain, he looked down at the lust, tingling and flaring about in his body, and said, cautiously, ‘I don’t know what you mean, madame.’

‘I’m not “madame”. I have only one name. Israbel. Under that name I sometimes sing and act at the Opèra.’

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Please sit down.’

She too, he sensed, saw right through him. She knew what he felt, still felt. She knew, too, he was still in command of himself.

Israbel seated herself. She drew off the plumed hat, and her hair fell all around her, down to her waist. There were no longer golden quills and spangles in it, yet it glittered with strange gilding.

‘I want you,’ she said, ‘to paint my portrait.’

‘You honour me. Alas, I’m very busy.’

‘No, you are not. You haven’t had a commission, nor any paid work, for 18 months. You mustn’t forget, I know Dumière, who knows you.’

‘Dumière doesn’t know everything about me, I’m afraid.’

‘No. You’re a secretive man. But your painting is interesting. Wouldn’t you like me to sit for you?’

‘Frankly, Madame Israbel –’

‘You wouldn’t,’ she finished for him.

The door opened. In blundered Colas with more wood for the stove, for it was a chilly evening. Israbel watched Colas, then she turned her eyes back to Plinta. And, annoyed, he realised he had been hungry for their return to him, sulky in the split second of her looking away.

Colas banged the stove door shut again and lumbered out. Like two interrupted lovers, they resumed their murmured conversation.

‘Dumière may have told you, monsieur, I’m well-off. I can pay you handsomely for your portrait of myself.’

‘Why do you want such a portrait?’

She said, without hesitation, ‘I’d like to look at it. I’d like to see myself in it.’

And, before he could quite stop himself, if he had even meant to stop himself, Plinta added, ‘That being because a portrait is the only way you ever could see yourself. Am I correct, madame? You don’t reflect in mirrors.’

Israbel smiled once more. It was difficult to take your gaze away from her mouth – unless you looked into her eyes; and then you could only look at those ….

‘I note you understand my predicament, monsieur,’ she said, as if they had spoken of something dull.

Plinta decided not to reply.

Israbel got up, and as she did so, even clothed in her fashionable Parisian dress, something fell from her like a seventh veil.

‘Others are fooled, of course,’ she remarked. ‘It’s commonly thought no-one can make out a vampire in a mirror. But naturally anyone can see us reflected there – save only we, ourselves.’

‘Then you have kindred?’ said Plinta, between wonder and alarm.

‘Perhaps – but I’ve met none of them. No, no, I’m quite alone. I speak of them only in the historical and mythic sense. I belong, you understand, monsieur, to an ancient sisterhood, brotherhood, packed with persons. Except I’ve never met any of them.’

‘Then how did you become what you are?’ Plinta asked, inevitably.

‘If I tell you that, will you paint me? Will you give me my mirror, Monsieur Plinta?’

He turned his back and walked off to the window.

Stood by the frozen glass, he gazed down at the icy, barely lit streets running toward the River Seine; the bell-clanging local church; then, to the sky like black lead. But

talking to her was a game he seemed unable to give up playing.

‘Why do you want to see yourself, madame? Anyone else’s face can tell you how beautiful you are.’

‘Not yours,’ she said.

Plinta lurched inside his skin. In utter silence, she had drawn physically close to him. Her narrow hand was on his shoulder. Almost as tall as he, she leaned to his ear: ‘I’ll tell you my story anyway,’ she murmured, ‘perhaps …’

Plinta did not move. He wondered if she would sink her teeth, or some other blood-letting implement, into his neck. But he felt only her perfumed warmth, and then a coldness, and turning, he saw she was once more seated far off across the studio, her feet stretched out to the stove, drinking coffee like an ordinary human woman.

She did not appear at the Opèra very often. When she did, she always took some small cameo part, usually limited to a single appearance lasting maybe five minutes, during which she sang an aria by Handel, Rameau, or Voulé. Her voice was good, if not especially brilliant, but nevertheless, a great hush would grip the theatre while she voiced her lines and sang her music. She was always rapturously applauded, and flowers rained on the stage.

She was said to have slept with some of the richer or more notorious patrons – bankers, poets, that sort. None of them had ever seemed any the worse for it. That is, none of them mysteriously died or otherwise disappeared. None of them, perhaps, more to the point, metamorphosed in any way. They merely went on with their own earthbound lives, long after they parted from her.

Men did become infatuated, of course. One had drowned himself, Plinta thought. Plinta had never paid her name much attention, nor even seen her, until Dumière became in turn obsessed by her.

Dumière took Plinta to dinner at the Café d'Orleans. Here they ate oysters and various roasted meats and drank wine and liqueurs. Dumière spoke mostly – solely – of Israbel. Plinta, to his own consternation, listened with interest and completely failed to be bored. He had already agreed with Israbel to paint her. There had seemed to be nothing else he could do. He did not tell Dumière, however, as if this were a guilty secret. He sensed Dumière would call him out over it to a dawn duel in the Bois, and perhaps shoot him dead in jealousy.

Dumière was not really Plinta's friend. Dumière used him as a sort of social musical instrument, a piano perhaps, coming up to him and playing him with enthusiasm for a few hours now and then, even in public, in restaurants and salons,

then forgetting him again entirely for months – years – on end.

Plinta watched Dumière all through the dinner. Even over the crystallised fruits, brandy and cigars, Dumière seemed the same as ever: handsome, spoiled and charming.

Finally, when they were drunk enough, Plinta said to him,

'Have you had her yet?'

'*Had* her?'

'The kiss that is more than a kiss.'

'Why, Plinta! What do you think? Aren't I irresistible? Isn't she?'

'You have, then.'

'You prude! Do you want me to describe it?' Amused in victory, Dumière glowed above the glowing cigar. 'Well? I will if you like.'

Plinta thought he *would* like; that was, his *body* would have liked to hear every detail. Conversely, his clever appraising mind was also highly curious.

'No, thank you.'

'I'll tell you this, Plinta, she isn't like any other woman I've ever known.'

'Doesn't the new lover always think that?'

'No, of course he doesn't. How absurd. We *pretend* we do, but we don't.'

‘Then –’ cautious still, Plinta leaned back – ‘then how is she *different*? Is she perverse?’

‘No such luck. Not that anything like that is necessary with her. Oh, her skin’s soft and smooth, her hair’s a marvel, she has a special scent she wears – like spice – her body is lithe as a snake’s. It isn’t any of that.’

‘And *do* you mean to marry her?’ asked Plinta, as Dumière fell silent, hypnotised by absorbing thoughts of Israbel.

‘I might. I wouldn’t mind it. Just to keep her to myself.’

‘Do you think you could?’

‘Yes. I’d put her in a cage. Like a panther. She only lets me visit her at night. She’s nocturnal, like most panthers.’

‘A *cage* –?’ Despite himself, Plinta was shocked, mostly at Dumière’s suddenly active imagination.

‘Oh, I mean a house, man, a big, glorious house – but I’d have the only key. I’d keep her there. Do you know,’ he added abruptly, ‘the strangest thing is when she looks into a mirror. I bought her one, you see, a gorgeous thing from Italy, silvered glass, gilt cupids – she stood in front of it nearly half an hour. Staring in at her reflection. She had such a puzzled look – a *sad* look – as if she were searching for something she couldn’t find – I wonder what …?’

Her soul, Plinta thought.

Worse than Dumière's invented cage-house, a door slammed in Plinta's heart then, trapping him inside with Israbel.

Israbel told Plinta at once she wished to pose for him in the nude.

This, rather than excite, made cool sense to him. After all, if she wanted to see herself – which no mirror could now ever show her – she wanted to see her flesh, not her clothes – she need only look into her wardrobe to behold those.

When she came out naked to the lamplight from behind the studio screen, he noted, unsurprised, her body was beautiful. But Plinta had seen the beautiful unclad bodies of women – and men – often in his trade.

What moved him was Israbel herself. Her gestures, expressions. Even the sound of her voice. For she would talk to him as he began his sketches.

Her voice was pleasant, restful. It was elusive, too. Neither young nor old, barely even feminine. A slightly tarnished silver voice, to vie with the gold glints in her eyes and hair.

He found her easy to capture on paper, and presently on canvas. Even her colours were simple – cream and black, with highlights of turquoise, navy and warmer tones, like shining metals. But her red mouth burned for him.

What would it be like – not to kiss – but to be bitten by the teeth of that burning mouth?

Plinta recalled that awareness he had had before, of the casting of a seventh veil – less the provocative act of a dancing Salome, it had been as if Israbel cast a skin.

She had not yet, despite her pledge, told him the tale of how she became what he knew she was, a vampire, who lived on the blood of others. But, for that matter, he did not know when or how she took blood. She had never approached him in any way, either in seduction or attack. Naturally, she would want the portrait completed to her satisfaction first. However, one day he would finish.

He actually considered, twice, following her when she left the studio, to see her method of predation. Yet he never did.

What would he do if she suddenly turned her attentions on him? Would he allow her his blood? Would he be able to prevent her?

He was not afraid of Israbel. He was not in love with her. But obsessed he was. Intellectually and artistically at least as much as physically and in his emotions.

A winter dusk brought her early, while a thick sun fall bubbled behind the church like sweet apricot preserves.

The painting was almost done, and he permitted her, when she asked, to see it. She had never asked before.

She stood a long while staring at it, just as Dumière – whom, now, Plinta had not seen for two months – had described with the costly cupid mirror. For one awful second, Plinta thought perhaps she could not see herself in the painted picture, either – it was a very exact likeness.

Then she said, ‘Oh, thank God. There I am again. Oh, yes. Thank God.’

‘Do you know, can you guess,’ she whispered presently, when he had sat her down, wrapped her furs about her, given her cognac, ‘what it’s like – never again to see your own self? Oh, there are whole peoples, I know, who never have mirrors and so never look into them – but even so – they may see a reflection in some surface. And here in this city – a polished table-top – window – a pool. Think of me, I was so young. Gazing instead at my hands – my feet – my shadow – because my shadow I still have – trying to remember myself from that. I pulled my hair across my eyes,

too, and looked at my hair. But myself – my face, my eyes, my mouth – forever gone. All of you could see them, *all of you* – all save I myself. And they were *mine*.'

'The penalty for everything else you've gained,' he said. Was this harsh? No, only a fact.

'True,' she said. 'Nevertheless, I have outwitted the penalty, or I *shall* do so. With the help of Plinta the Painter. Do you know, Plinta, the oddest thing – I'd only seen myself four or five times in any case, before I lost the ability to view my own reflection. In my – shall I even say *home*? – in the slum where I was born, there were few mirrors. Despite that, as I've said – once in a window-pane, and once a table polished with my hand – and once in a pool of rainwater in a gutter, and once in the side of a bottle – but once a man gave me a piece of looking-glass. I looked, and truly saw myself, and he said, *Now you do as I say, or I'll cut that face you see across with my razor.* I did what he said. He still took off his belt to beat me. I hadn't pleased him, you understand. That was when I ran. This, Plinta, was about a hundred, a hundred and seven years ago. It was in the era just before the Revolution. Paris was raw and smarting, not yet seething – I didn't notice. The city was like a model made of wet newspaper. Unreal. And I must only escape. So, I escaped, as you see.'

He said, 'You became what you are now.'

Then she told him.

The great cat in the Place du Coeur had approached her so suddenly and so swiftly, seeming to move as if on wheels, that Israbel had had no time to think, or to decide after all once more to run away. Next second, its body touched hers. The body of the cat was warm, she said, as a hearth, or a summer stone, and its pelt was smooth, velvet-soft, yet prickling with electric life. The instant they were in contact, a vast soothing, in fact a feeling of *content*, flooded Israbel. 'It was like the first time I ever tasted good brandy.'

The Place du Coeur was now, she said, long felled, its yards and hovels squashed and built over. Alleys attenuated from it however, then and still, creeping toward the Ile de la Cité.

Israbel remembered only this, walking very fast with the great leopard, whose neck was long and who was as tall as a horse, both it and she unseen and incredibly unnoted, through shadows and night. Here and there bleary lights shone in the rain. Sometimes loud displays of inebriation, rage or merriment flowed round the edges of their progress. For everything like that seemed divided by their passage, like a river, which they swam together, she and the cat, effortlessly.

They came eventually out onto the open spaces before the Cathedral.

Notre Dame, Our Lady of Paris, was that night herself lit to gold and smoky red. In her windows, dark blue fires and rubies. Far above, her demonic gargoyles craned, peering over and down at the city, their wings locked until midnight should strike in some other dimension and let them loose.
But the leopard drew Israbel away down a sort of slope, and into a cavern under the street. She could not say exactly how it drew her. It was as if she had become invisibly connected to its skin, the vibrant *spirit* of its short, dense fur, which led her along like a benevolent leash.

'What did I think or feel? I was only happy. I felt quite safe, going down into the dark. If instead it had somehow drawn me up the very heights of the Cathedral, I couldn't have been afraid.'

In the cavern – no, she had sometimes, in later years, looked for this spot by Notre Dame, never found it, nor any entrance to it – was the leopard's lair. The stone floor was dry and thick with straw and rushes and scraps of material. The air was warm yet clean, faintly tinged with the incense of Notre Dame, freshened by little cracks and other apertures.

She smelled the river, too, wholesome as the rest.

She lay down against the cat, which held her between its great muscled forelegs, the paws resting around her, without a

hint of talons. It breathed into her face. And its breath was healthy and clean, and smelled only a little salty.

'Some of those I tell this story ask if the cat then ravished me, as lions can be trained to do with human women. Yet no such thing happened at all. Oh, it wasn't like that. It was as if I lay again, a child, in the arms of my mother or a father who loved me tenderly. I never felt so secure, nor have I ever after. So I slept, my head on one of the huge arms, against the breast of dappled fur, to the rhythmic hymn of its breathing.'

Israbel paused. This hiatus went on and on.

Plinta said finally, 'And then?'

She sighed. 'I woke up. It was twilight. I felt well and strong, as if I'd eaten a nourishing meal and drunk a little wine. And as if I'd bathed in hot scented water – that was how I now smelled. I wasn't under the city anymore. I was on a backstreet against a wall, out of sight, where it must have taken me when it was done. I might have dreamed everything, but for knowing I was glad it wasn't daytime, and for the sense of well-being, of *vitality* – neither of which has ever left me since. Even so, I started to cry. I ran about, trying to find the way back down to my beloved friend – for yes, the great cat had become my only friend and all the family I had. Of course, I detected no way and not a single clue. I never saw my leopard again. Presently, instead, my own –

no, *human* – kind discovered me. And so I learned my powers over them, what I could do and gain. What I had become.'

'A vampire.'

'An immortal thing. Naturally limited to the night, but otherwise able to exist as she wishes. And fed – *cherished* – by mortal blood.'

Plinta roused himself. He felt cold and sleepy, inert and depressed, all the opposites of what she had described her own feelings to be.

'But how had – this cat – taken your blood – how had it refashioned you?'

'Do you really wish to know?'

'Yes –'

Israbel lowered her eyes of black turquoise. 'The pelt,' she said simply, in a sad, low voice, 'the beautiful fur of it – every fibre leached every atom of my blood away, and filled me in return with the ichor of the vampire race.'

'Its *fur*!'

Plinta surged up. He strode up and down the studio, rubbing circulation back into numbed arms and hands, stopping only to shovel more wood into the stove. The room seemed hot – yet he was freezing.

When he happened to glance at the clock, he was astounded. Two hours had passed since Israbel had first arrived. The moment he looked at her now, she too got up.

She had not taken off any but her outer garments, the furs. It seemed she did not, tonight, mean to pose for her portrait.

Certainly she did not, for she said then, ‘Monsieur, your picture of me is all I could ever hope for. You’ve given me a very special gift. Now I shall pay you.’

‘It isn’t finished!’ Plinta exclaimed. He himself heard the panic in his tone. It was not only the unfinished painting that troubled him. It seemed their commerce, hers and his, was at an end.

But Israbel only nodded gravely. ‘Not quite finished, I agree. But that’s as it should be – as it *must* be, don’t you think. For neither am I, monsieur, *finished*. Nor, perhaps, can I ever be. The picture has reached the very stage I myself am at. Like me, it must remain there, or how can I see myself in it?’

Plinta stood still. He stared at Israbel, memorising her, her grace, elegance and otherness.

‘And so,’ she said gently, ‘let me settle my account with you.’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘what this picture can be worth.’

‘Everything.’

‘Do I ask everything of you, then?’

‘You know that I’m rich.’

‘Don’t pay me,’ he said, ‘in money.’

‘Then how?’

As she questioned him like that, Plinta saw in her a total fatal innocence. It had nothing to do with naiveté or foolishness. *I must never lose her*. Aloud he said, 'Show me.'

'Ah.'

'Show me how – *pelt* – can take blood – *how you feed yourself*.'

The crudeness of the words he had used, and his desire to find out, both appalled him. He was humiliated by himself, and trembling, but even so would not deny what he had said. She answered, 'If you wish. But – I'm hungry, Plinta, Monsieur Plinta the Painter. If it's to be you –'

'*Me*. Who *else*!'

'Then, I shan't hold back. You must become as I am. Do you want such a thing?'

Plinta thought about it. But he had been thinking of it constantly, behind a screen of debate, arguing with himself that, in fact, it was not possible. But it was.

'Madame Israbel, I have so much to learn of my trade. That alone would need immortality. I'd like the time. I don't subscribe to the idea that, being always myself, I must become less. I think one must be able to *evolve* – even in the same continuing body. Yes, I'd give up the daylight. But I too am already partly nocturnal. I sleep through a day, rise at sunset. But more than that – I want to *know* –'

Israbel turned her head. This was as if she listened, obediently, to some angel at her right shoulder, who now told her what she must do. It seemed she knew the angel of old. Its advice was always sound.

Before, he had seen a seventh veil fall from her.

Now Israbel touched the bodice of her dress, and the yellow silk parted and dropped, like a veil, and all else with it. As before, she stood in front of him naked. Her hair, loose and gleaming, framed her face, neck and upper body.

Plinta felt a stab of sexual appetite so intense it hurt him. Then he grasped it was not sexual at all.

She came to him as her kind did, as the great cat had come to her – sudden and swift, gliding as if over burnished ice.

And as she came, her hair, her *hair*, lifted up on her head in two wide, black-flaming wings, glittering with tines and prisms of diamond, topaz and gold, and as it fastened on him, and her flesh met his own clothed body, he felt the touch of her, hair, skin, her eyes, her lips. Oh, not like mother or father. This was like the meeting of mortal man with god.

Plinta seemed to lie that night high up on the roofs of the Cathedral, among the army of gargoyles that, as a white

moon rose, flew back and forth, scratching their claws on the parapets, their eyes full of misty smoulderings.

Here, Israbel took his blood, not biting, but through her skin and her hair, the soft persuasive caresses ebbing and swelling like a symphony.

He understood that, in the future, he too must take sustenance in this way. But *her* hair, so long and thick, had become two wings, like those of some giant Egyptian hawk. She too, he saw, as he lay quiet between the delicious bouts of her feeding, flew off the roof, into the sky and stars. Sometimes she even gripped the gargoyles, held them, while both they and she soared across the moon, her hair coiling them, their tails wrapped around her. Did she take blood also from their carved stone, replacing it with immortal vampiric essences? Of course, how else were they able to fly?

Near dawn she closed his eyes with her lips, a kind of kiss.

‘Sleep now. Be at peace. Asleep, the sun can’t harm you. Tomorrow night you will be changed.’

‘Then tomorrow, where shall I meet you?’ he said. But Plinta discovered he could not, now she had shut them, open his eyes, and she did not reply, and had drawn away. A colossal slumberousness stole over him. He sank into it, not minding.

In the dream then, a sleep, which itself held a dream. In this second trance, he saw Israbel after all, her face framed now by the velvet and silk curtains of a stage. Wings flew out from her skull. Her eyes were highly reflective – like a pair of looking-glasses. Otherwise, her face had no features at all. It was a faceless face, a perfect, blind face, of fabric stretched taut on bone.

Colas found him the next evening. Plinta lay stiff and marble cold, and looking bloodless as marble, there on the studio rug, splashed by the dregs of a sunset.

Colas gave a yowl. Howling and yelping like a wolf, he rolled Plinta about the floor, and when neighbours rushed up the stairs, wailed that Plinta had died, was dead, and now Colas would be slung out on the street – Colas's only actual concern.

'No, you dolt. Look, he's waking up. *Dead? Plinta?* Only drunk –'

Plinta woke. He stretched, and Colas, who genuinely had seen him minutes before dead as the deadest corpse, backed away gibbering.

But Plinta himself felt wonderful, like a prince who is in love and has, besides, dined on a banquet. He threw a boot at Colas, and Colas, at last reassured his patron was the same as ever, tramped off to fetch the coffee.

Already the marvellous dream – of the Cathedral, the gargoyles, the vampire, and her attentions – was fading. Of the dream-within- the-dream did anything remain? Maybe not. But Plinta soon noticed Israbel had taken her portrait away with her. Why not, when she had bought it, and at an excellent price. Next time he saw it, the picture, he would be again with her.

One last splinter of dream-memory did linger, however. He had asked her where he should meet her, Israbel his sister, now, in blood. But he had been stupid to ask, for he had not needed to. Tonight, as much of Paris knew, Israbel was due to act and sing her glimmering five minutes at the Opèra.

Plinta threw his mirror into the cupboard before he left the studio. Now a vampire, he could never again see himself reflected, and had duly proved as much with one or two contemptuous glares at the glass. Others, though, *would* see him in mirrors and not suspect, just as Israbel had explained.

Would she be glad, at last, of his company? They were brethren, and she had admitted she had discovered no kindred, just as never again had she located the supernatural cat.

Two moods possessed Plinta as he walked the glacial streets of Paris, moving toward the golden ornament of the theatre. One was an elation not unmixed with eager fear. The other was a deep melancholy, a sort of shadow. The first state

he comprehended. The second puzzled him. Was he in mourning then for his purely *human* life, now ended? What did that matter? Nothing, not at all. But no, it was not that.

He stood in the light-spiked dark, and thought, *Perhaps immortality is only formed, for us, from those countless days we may never now experience. A life of nights, doubled.*

All things are paid for. Even Israbel had paid for the painting he had made of her.

Plinta took a box at the theatre, a rare extravagance. He soon glimpsed Dumière across the auditorium in a box of his own, with other friends. Dumière saluted Plinta, pleased to see him at a distance. But how jealous Dumière would be, if only he knew. Had he offered Israbel marriage? Israbel and Plinta were married, in more than religion or legality.

One flesh –

Where shall I feed? Plinta thought, as the curtain rose on some spectacular unimportance. *She will show me. She will be my teacher.* Then he sat back, watching the acts of the play through half-closed eyes, and all about the theatre rustled and murmured, whistled and called, alienly alive. He imagined it was like being in the zoological gardens. He had never felt a part of them, the human race, and now was not.

To great clapping and calls, Israbel came out in the fifth act, as the programme stipulated, to perform her part and sing her aria, which that night was by Rameau.

Plinta sat forward. His eyes widened. His heart, or some more profound mechanism, slammed high into his chest, then leapt away, down into a chasm. Tears rolled, helpless to save themselves, from his eyes.

If he had been able, in those minutes, like the Biblical Samson, he would have risen, grabbed vast pillars of the Opèra temple, and brought it crashing down.

Samson had lost all. Plinta too had lost.

Now he could never know, he who must learn *everything* – whether or not he had loved her. Instead he would be, like the rest of his kind, bereft, and quite unique.

On the stage Israbel sang, and the audience hung in wild suspense until the last note, then bellowed its applause and flung its flowers. And across the theatre, Dumière sprang up and raced, fever-flushed from his box, to seek her in the dressing rooms.

But Plinta stayed where he was, still as when Colas had found him and thought him, rightly, dead. Only the mobile tears ran on from Plinta's eyes.

For she had warned him, had she not? Even his mirror, in its own cruelly amusing way, had done so. Certainly his inner dream of facelessness. No vampire could see itself in

reflection – only human things could see it there. But that was not only in mirrors. No vampire could see any vampire – themselves or another – either in a mirror, or anywhere in the whole crystal globe of the heartless, lonely, reflective world. On the stage, Israbel was taking her bow. Plinta alone did not applaud. To him she was now entirely inaudible and invisible, just as he was now entirely inaudible and invisible to Israbel, and to all their kind.